

Alan Wheatley

Alan Wheatley (19 April 1907 – 30 August 1991) was an English actor. He was a well known stage actor in the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s, appeared in forty films between 1931 and 1965 and was a frequent broadcaster on radio from the 1930s to the 1990s, and on television from 1938 to 1964. His most prominent television role was the Sheriff of Nottingham in the 1950s TV series *The Adventures of Robin Hood*, with Richard Greene as Robin Hood; Wheatley played the sheriff in 54 episodes between 1955 and 1959. Earlier, he had played Sherlock Holmes in the first television series featuring the great detective.

In addition to acting, Wheatley was a radio announcer during the Second World War, broadcasting to occupied Europe, where he became a well known voice. Poetry was another of his interests: he translated the poetry of Federico García Lorca and was a frequent reader of poems on air. In his later years he worked mainly in radio, as a narrator, a verse-reader and an actor.

Life and career

Early years

Wheatley was born in Tolworth, Surrey, on 19 April 1907, the son of William Henry Wheatley and his wife Rose Eva (née Towers). He was educated at Tiffin School, and was then employed in industrial psychology.^[1] He made his first appearance on the stage at the Festival Theatre, Cambridge in October 1928, as Randall Utterword in *Heartbreak House*, after which he was a member of the repertory company at that theatre and later in Hull. In 1930 he toured as Sir Roger Fairfax in *Sweet Nell of Old Drury* with Fred Terry, and in 1931 in *The Quaker Girl*.^[1]

In November 1931 Wheatley performed in London at the Embassy and St Martin's theatres, as the Journalist in *Britannia of Billingsgate*.^[1] In other London productions in 1932–33 he played the Guide in *Miracle at Verdun*, Master Klaus in *The Witch* and Godfrey Perry in *Wild Justice*. He appeared at the Malvern Festival in August 1933,^[1] before returning to the West End, where his roles included Edgar in *King Lear* to the Lear of William Devlin.^[2]

For nine months in 1934–35 Wheatley was leading man at the Croydon Repertory Theatre,^[1] and in 1936 he made his first appearance with the Old Vic company. He made his Broadway

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Wheatley as the Sheriff of Nottingham in *The Adventures of Robin Hood*

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Died	30 August 1991 (aged 84) <div><u>Westminster</u>, London, England</div>

debut in the same year, in the Old Vic's production of *St Helena*, playing Las Cases to the Bonaparte of Maurice Evans.^[3] He subsequently toured in Scandinavia and adjoining countries, as Major Petkoff in *Arms and the Man* and Arnold Champion-Cheney in *The Circle*.^[1]

Occupation(s) Actor and radio announcer
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After returning to London, Wheatley's last stage roles of the 1930s were Disraeli in *Mr Gladstone*, with Devlin; Mosca in *Volpone*, with Donald Wolfit; Frank Harris in *Oscar Wilde* with Francis L. Sullivan; Sebastian in *Walk in the Sun*, with Terence de Marney; and Sir Patrick Cullen in *The Doctor's Dilemma*, with Clifford Evans.^[1] He appeared in several films in the 1930s (see Filmography below), and, already a frequent broadcaster on BBC radio, he made his first television appearance in August 1938, playing Lane in *The Importance of Being Earnest*.^[4] In the same year he played Sam Weller in *Bardell against Pickwick*, adapted from *The Pickwick Papers*.^[5]

War and post-war

In September 1939 at the time of the outbreak of the Second World War Wheatley joined the BBC Drama Repertory Company. From May to September 1940 he was an announcer on the BBC Overseas Service and then until March 1945 he was principal announcer and newsreader for the BBC European Service.^[1] *The Times* said of him, "His clarity of diction and balanced speaking voice became well known in war-time Europe, where people in occupied countries turned to the BBC for information".^[6]

While serving with the European Service Wheatley met Rafael Nadal, a friend of Federico García Lorca, and developed an interest in the poet's works.^[7] He made English translations of several of them; "Lament on the Death of a Bullfighter" was the first to be completed, and was broadcast by the BBC in 1946.^[7] He recorded nine of his translations for the gramophone in 1953, released in Britain on the Argo label and in the US by Westminster Records.^[8]

When BBC television resumed after its suspension during the war, Wheatley played a wide range of characters, from Sam Weller again (1946), to the humorously cynical schoolmaster Rupert Billings in *The Happiest Days of Your Life* (1949) and the tragic king in *Richard II* (1950).^[9] *The Manchester Guardian* called the last "a brilliant performance: television acting at its best".^[10] Wheatley's film credits in the 1940s include *Caesar and Cleopatra* (1945), *The Rake's Progress* (1945), *Appointment with Crime* (1946), *Brighton Rock* (1947) and *Calling Paul Temple* (1948).^[9]

In 1945 Wheatley rejoined the Old Vic company, touring as Mercutio in *Romeo and Juliet*. At the end of the year he joined the company at the Mercury Theatre, London, where his roles included the Greek and Tegeus in a double bill of W. B. Yeats's *The Resurrection* and Christopher Fry's *A Phoenix Too Frequent*.^[11] Julian in Ronald Duncan's *This Way to the Tomb* (which the cast also played at the Studio Champs-Élysées in Paris and the Garrick Theatre, London), and Harry in T. S. Eliot's *The Family Reunion*.^[1] In 1949 he played the title role in *Hamlet* at the Richmond Theatre. The reviewer in *The Stage* thought Wheatley displayed "a good voice and presence" in the role but was "rather lightweight".^[12]

1950s

In 1951 Wheatley played Sherlock Holmes in a series of six televised dramatisations of Conan Doyle stories. Holmes had been played on television before, in one-off adaptations, but this was the first series to feature him.^[13] Wheatley's co-stars were Raymond Francis as Dr Watson and Bill Owen as Inspector Lestrade. *The Times* commented that as Holmes, Wheatley "catches the essential character. He is a figure, not merely of wonder or of fun, but of romantic possibility".^[14] No audio or video recordings of the productions are known to exist.

Between 1955 and 1959 Wheatley is recorded by the British Film Institute as appearing in 54 episodes of the ABC television series The Adventures of Robin Hood as the Sheriff of Nottingham, the perpetual adversary of Robin (Richard Greene).^[9] He played the role "with many a villainous smile", as *The Times* said, but eventually withdrew from it.^[6] His colleague Peter Cotes said that the part made him into a well known "personality",^[13] and although he was regarded by colleagues as "the best high comedy actor in Britain",^[15] and "daring", "haunting" and "moving" in various roles,^[16] nonetheless, after the Robin Hood series he was, in the words of an obituarist, "more inclined to be cast as a suave villain than as a hero".^[6] Concurrently with some of the Robin Hood series, Wheatley played Pontius Pilate in a BBC television religious drama series, *Jesus of Nazareth* first shown in 1956.^[17] His other television roles of the 1950s included Rupert Cadell in *Rope* (1953) and the murderous Jonathan Brewster in the comedy *Arsenic and Old Lace* (1958).^[9] His film roles included Inspector Braddock in *The Limping Man* (1953) and Inspector MacLennan in *The House Across the Lake* (1954).^[9]

Wheatley's entry in *Who's Who in the Theatre* records no stage appearances by him between 1952 and 1959.^[1] In February 1959 he played Edgar Marr in an American thriller, *House Without Windows*.^[1] In December of the same year he played Abanazar in *Aladdin*, a lavish show at the London Coliseum, with songs by Cole Porter, production and choreography by Robert Helpmann, and co-starring Bob Monkhouse, Ian Wallace and Ronald Shiner.^[18]

Later years

In the 1960s Wheatley continued to broadcast frequently on television and radio. He played Richard D'Oyly Carte in a three-part BBC television series *Gilbert and Sullivan: The Immortal Jesters* (1961), and appeared in episodes of *Maigret* (1962 and 1963), *Doctor Who* and *Compact*, both in 1964.^[17] In the same year he played Prince Rohat, Minister of the Interior, in Victor Canning's six-part drama *The Midnight Men*.^[17] His last cinema role listed by the British Film Institute was Major Ronald Grey-Simmons in *Clash by Night* (1965).^[19]

In later years Wheatley worked mostly on radio, as narrator and poetry-reader as well as actor. In 1975 he played Judas Iscariot in the 12-part cycle *The Man Born to be King* by Dorothy L. Sayers. He acted in adaptations of plays by writers including Noël Coward and Somerset Maugham, and of novels by Alexandre Dumas, James Hilton, Anthony Powell and C. P. Snow among others.^[17] He made his final appearance in 1991 in a BBC Radio 4 adaptation of *A Day by the Sea*, with Wendy Hiller and Michael Hordern, both old friends of his.^[16]

Wheatley died of a heart attack in Westminster, London on 30 August 1991, aged 84.^{[6][20]}

Filmography

Year	Title	Role	Notes
1931	<i><u>Out of the Blue</u></i>	Extra	Uncredited
1931	<i><u>The Love Race</u></i>	Extra	Uncredited
1936	<i><u>The Conquest of Air</u></i>	Borelli	
1937	<i><u>William Tindale</u></i>	William Tindale	
1944	<i><u>Love Story</u></i>	Partygoer	Uncredited
1945	<i><u>The Rake's Progress</u></i>	Edwards	
	<i><u>Caesar and Cleopatra</u></i>	Persian	
1946	<i><u>Appointment with Crime</u></i>	Noel Penn	
	<i><u>Spring Song</u></i>	Menelli	
1947	<i><u>Jassy</u></i>	Sir Edward Walker	
	<i><u>The End of the River</u></i>	Irygoyen	
	<i><u>Brighton Rock</u></i>	Fred Hale	
1948	<i><u>Corridor of Mirrors</u></i>	Edgar Orsen	
	<i><u>Counterblast</u></i>	M.W. Kennedy	
	<i><u>Calling Paul Temple</u></i>	Edward Lathom	
	<i><u>Sleeping Car to Trieste</u></i>	Karl / Charles Pool	
1949	<i><u>It's Not Cricket</u></i>	Felix	
	<i><u>For Them That Trespass</u></i>	Librarian	Uncredited
1951	<i><u>Home to Danger</u></i>	Hughes	
1952	<i><u>Whispering Smith Hits London</u></i>	Reith	
	<i><u>The Pickwick Papers</u></i>	Fogg	
1953	<i><u>Spaceways</u></i>	Dr Smith	
	<i><u>The Limping Man</u></i>	Inspector Braddock	
	<i><u>Small Town Story</u></i>	Nick Hammond	
1954	<i><u>The Javenese Dagger</u></i>	Victor	Short
	<i><u>The Diamond</u></i>	Thompson Blake	
	<i><u>The House Across the Lake</u></i>	Inspector MacLennan	
	<i><u>Delayed Action</u></i>	Mark Cruden	
	<i><u>Elizabethan Express</u></i>	Narrator	Voice
1955	<i><u>Simon and Laura</u></i>	Adrian Lee	
1958	<i><u>The Duke Wore Jeans</u></i>	King of Ritallia	
1960	<i><u>Inn for Trouble</u></i>	Harold Gaskin	
1961	<i><u>Frederic Chopin</u></i>	<i>Unknown</i>	short film

	<u><i>The Shadow of the Cat</i></u>	Inspector Rowles	
1963	<u><i>Master Spy</i></u>	Paul Skelton	
	<u><i>Tomorrow at Ten</i></u>	Assistant Commissioner Bewley	
1964	<u><i>A Jolly Bad Fellow</i></u>	Epicene	
	<u><i>Clash By Night</i></u>	Ronald Grey-Simmons	

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External links

- Alan Wheatley (<https://www.imdb.com/name/nm0923664/>) at IMDb
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